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SPANISH FICTION FROM CABALLERO TO PEREDA.¹

THOSE Spanish novelists whom foreigners are apt to know—Galdós, Valera, Bazán, Valdés—all belong to a generation that fought its way into literature about and after 1870. But novels were plentiful in Spain before that era, and although for the most part of slight value, exceptions are not wanting.

The radical fault of this fiction is its childishness. The authors deny themselves nothing: social problems are discussed, orthodoxy defended; there are glorifications of virtue, hymns to passion, visions of heaven, hell, and purgatory. But the fat phrases are spoken with the tremulous, irresolute voice of a minor. It is a child's hand that is exerting itself to set the world a-moving.

It happens, however, now and then, that the child has talent, perhaps even glimpses of genius. The volumes published over the signature of Fernan Caballero were many in number and heavy in bulk, but as far as their intellectual quality was concerned they might all have been written before the long-lived authoress was sixteen and after she had passed seventy-eight. She admires Balzac, and refers with approval to his political and religious conservatism. But whereas Balzac's religion was of a kind to fill the pious Manzoni with apprehension, Caballero's religiosity would appeal with equal potency to sextons, apple women, and the Bourbons after 1814. However little faith one may have in Balzac as a constructive statesman, there is absolutely no denying that he diagnosed the social and political cankers of Louis Philippe's bourgeois monarchy, for in "Z. Marcas" he predicted its inevitable downfall eight years before this actually came to pass. Caballero's political insight is as valuable as Marie Antoinette's, who chided the people

¹A chapter of a work on the evolution of prose fiction in the nineteenth century.

for clamoring for bread when cakes could be had so cheap. But statesmanship is not an indispensable requisite to a novelist. It is worse that Caballero is as innocent of novelistic technique as of political economy. Her novels are the leisurely talk of a female gossip with a whole evening to spare; her short stories the more hurried neighborly chats across the fence before breakfast, with exactly as much of concentration and order. But, after relieving his mind in the preceding fashion, the conscientious critic pauses, reflects, and regrets. For he recalls to mind the sundry times that he has seen these clouds of words pierced by rays illuminating traits of character and custom with an unforgettable sheen. Ever and anon the clouds even shaped themselves into human form that will not easily be forgotten, as is the case with certain characters in "The Sea Gull" and "Clementia." If Fernan Caballero's powers of ratiocination are as untrained as a child's, she also in moments perceives character with a bright child's intuition. If she wastes words with the recklessness of irresponsible old age, she possesses some of the charity which comes with advancing years. "Servile and Liberal" is upon the whole pretty poor stuff, but it is redeemed by the second chapter with the inimitable schoolmaster, his wife and his sister, that ugly and lovely trio whom the sudden appearance of a political refugee frightens almost to death.

Fernan Caballero had merits which may without exaggeration be called sterling. The greatest was that she told the plain lives of the people of her own day and country. If she did not do it with the art of a Jane Austen—hardly even a Maria Edgeworth—she did it well enough to be accounted one of the women whom literature could ill afford to spare.

Whenever Fernan Caballero tries to be pathetic or terrific, her success is at best questionable. When some one in "The Two Graces" produces from under a cloth a human limb—the arm which a sinful but hard-tried woman has lost through a cancerous complaint—the effect is about as powerful as might be that of five severed finger nails suddenly uncovered. Still, Caballero appears earnest and pro-

found by comparison with her younger imitator, Antonio de Trueba. "Rose-Colored Stories" is the title of one of his volumes; it might be applied to all of them. Whether he describes the peasants of the Basque provinces or the artisans of Madrid's suburbs, he is all smiles and sunshine. This perpetual merriment palls on the reader, but taken in small doses Trueba is not without charm. Some of Fernan Caballero's best work was done in recasting popular legends and anecdotes, and Trueba's handling of similar matter is not always inferior to his teacher's. Like much other Spanish fiction, Trueba's tales never indicate a strong grip, but quite often show the gentle pressure of carefully modeling fingers. A graceful drollery lights up some of his shorter stories as the smile of fresh young lips.

Trueba was unable to widen the scope of his country's literature in any noteworthy degree. A writer of much greater power is Pedro Antonio de Alarcón. He is one of not a few who, because everybody else in the nineteenth century wrote novels, did so too, thereby violating the true character of his talents. In 1855 Alarcón published the "Finale of Norma," a very romantic and not very good novel. Two years later he suffered defeat with a play which was his first and only dramatic attempt. No careful reader will fail to see that Alarcón made a mistake in allowing himself to be so quickly and completely discouraged, for, whatever talent his later novels reveal, it is the talent of the born dramatist—a dramatist essentially of the Spanish type—not one who can make character unfold itself through dialogue which all the while leads up to action, conflict, and climax. Most of the classical Spanish plays have little, if any, character-unfolding; but they abound in situations, thrilling or laughter-provoking, the force of which causes the spectator to overlook that between them chasms are yawning which a luxuriant lyrical flora is in vain intended to cover. In modern times, Echegaray's dramas are widely known specimens of the genre which has also been cultivated outside of Spain—by Hugo, for one. It is far from universally beloved nowadays, but large numbers will accept it if served

in operatic form by Italian composers. The proverb which makes an assertion regarding the customs of *birds of a feather* never found a better illustration than when so many of Hugo's dramas were appropriated by Italian librettists. But if Hugo's theater served Verdi well in the making of "Ernani" and "Rigoletto," the Spanish stage furnished him quite as useful material for three or four other operas, among them his greatest popular success, "The Troubadour." There is nothing in the world which Alarcón's best tragical novel, "The Infant with the Globe," resembles so much as an opera by Verdi. As if prompted by an irresistible instinct, the author has put everything in such inviting order for a composer that the wonder is the invitation has not long ago been heeded. It should be no objection that the main features are also those of Scott's "Bride of Lammermoor," which Donizetti set to such catchy music, for there are sufficient opportunities for new effects in the old approved style. What a quartet *à la Rigoletto* the first lottery scene would make, with the priest (bass) to the left trying to calm the raging Manoel (tenor), while to the right the usurer Elias (barytone) argues with his daughter Soledad (soprano and *primadonna assoluta*). Manoel's subsequent leave-taking would give both composer and singer the chance of a lifetime. And where would even a Mascagni find more horror to the square inch than in the closing scene, where the lover chokes the *primadonna assoluta* to death in his valiant arms, and is immediately stabbed and killed by her husband? But it is unfair to Alarcón to bracket his name with Mascagni's; it is Verdi at his very best whom he recalls as much as it is at all possible for a master of one art to recall one of another. The finest passages in Verdi's "Requiem" are in nowise sublimer than the scene where the raging Manoel calms down and begins to adorn the Divine Infant with the jewels procured for a very different purpose.

As Alarcón's tragical novels are *opera seria*, so is his most celebrated humorous story, "The Cocked Hat," *opera buffa*. Here, too, prevails the same symmetric arrangement of characters and situations. "The Cocked Hat" enjoys

more popular favor than anything else of its author; but, good though its comedy is, it by no means surpasses the tragedy of "The Infant." Neither is of the highest possible order, but of their kind there is nowhere anything better.

It is possible, it is even probable, that Alarcón would have resented such praise. He had read a number of modern books, from which undigested scraps lie in heaps and layers all through his novels. The character of these scraps assists in spelling out the author's deepest intentions. There is nothing surprising in his comparing his heroes not only to lions and tigers, but to Napoleon, Apollo, Hercules, Michael Angelo's David, or, as in the case of Fabian Conde, "all Lord Byron's heroes." This is only what might be expected from one of the clan to which numerous signs show that he belongs. But it is curious to see him appropriate Homais from "Madame Bovary" for the purpose of vilifying heterodoxy, to which he steadfastly adhered along with his wildly romantic tendencies. He has not even taken the trouble to disguise his kidnapped actor by a new make-up: Vitriolo is a druggist as Homais is, and uses the same jargon. But some avenging fate has provided him with the one vice with which no novelistic character must ever be tainted: he bores the reader. Homais may have bored some of his townspeople—and even that is doubtful, for the fools thought he was wise and the shrewd ones knew he was funny—but it is certain that to Flaubert's readers he is the most entertaining of fools.

Unintelligent assaults upon opinions current in the latter half of the century are almost the only evidence that Alarcón's novels were written in that period. Nor is the undeniable charm of the best of his short stories due to any particularly modern excellences, either in point of matter or in technique. If that author is a romantic who wallows in sentiment and passion, with a total disregard of the demands of common sense, then Alarcón is the most romantic of writers, and—why hesitate to say so?—"The Infant with the Globe" the sublimest of romantic novels. Even the sport which

Alarcón has with Spanish bureaucracy in "The Cocked Hat" would have been something natural in the days of Tieck and Brentano. It is, then, as the last of the romantics that Alarcón calls for consideration; it is as such that he is likely to gain immortality. All the rest, his psychological efforts *à la* Constant and Balzac in "The Prodigy," his sacerdotal posing in "The Scandal," etc., is already defunct and may be left in the silent tomb.

Perhaps the late survival of a genuine romantic in Spanish literature will to many cause less surprise than the early appearance in the same quarters of a full-blooded naturalist. Such, nevertheless, is Jose Maria de Pereda. His first writings, among which are some of his very best, appeared early in the sixties, under the patronage of Trueba, who, however, took exception to what he called their *pessimistic* tone. Pereda has been writing ever since; his masterpiece, the novel "Fine Spun" (*Sotileza*), was published in 1885. But although thus the contemporary of the leaders of the French naturalistic movement, he is also in a sense one of its forerunners. He began by describing country life with absolutely no purpose beyond the satisfaction of his own artistic cravings. These early writings—most of which are now gathered in the volumes "Mountain Scenes" and "Sketches and Outlines"—have more kindred with Turgenev's "Sportsman's Diary" than anything else, in that they are absolutely faithful reproductions of the author's personal observations, with no desire to make black blacker or pink pinker, or any endeavor to enhance the interest by grouping the observations round a plot. Both authors prove themselves artists solely by their skill in selecting and stating facts. The main difference between the Spaniard and the Russian would seem to be that the former had no such reformatory object with his veracious account as the latter had with his. This might be ascribed to the fact that the Russian peasants were serfs, the Spanish not, but the admission must also be made that at the start Pereda did not betray that love for the poor which was always vivid in Turgenev. It sprang up in him later on to the benefit of his production, which it

sweetened and mellowed without in the least impairing its truthfulness.

Pereda's aims and methods place him apart not only from those who make uneducated people serve as exemplars to their polished but unregenerate fellow-beings, but also the writers to whom as a land Spain remains ever the land of toreadors and castanets—a group whose most eminent representative was Mérimée. While Mérimée invariably selects the exceptional trait, Pereda is bent on bringing out the typical one. He paints in gray tints, shunning, even in moments of emotion approaching pathos, the loud note, the cry. His coast population is one of coarse habits: for arguments they use ugly words, heavy blows, and vicious kicks. And not a few of both men and women drink to excess. Yet such extreme cases of brutishness and vice as other modern novelists have used with telling effect find no place in Pereda's canvas. And so it is with the virtues of these people—for virtues they have in as large a measure as those socially high above them. Industrious women and honest, hard-working men are numerous among them; kindness and charity to sufferers are far from unknown. But Pereda insists as little on this as on the opposite set of qualities. He is absolutely free from sentimentality: from his entire production I recall not a single occurrence of that deliberate call for handkerchiefs which was the besetting vice of Dickens, and in which hardly a novelist of the nineteenth century has not indulged on some occasion or other.

Pereda has a way of making good and bad happen so closely intermingled as to make it often very hard to put one's finger precisely on one spot, saying, "This is all good!" and on another, "This is all bad!" Is it not generally so in life? May not this be the explanation why it is possible to relate one and the same series of events—the life of some famous person, for instance, or the history of a great catastrophe, such as the French Revolution—twice over, repeating both times the same facts, but each time interpreting them differently, making them at the first telling seem almost wholly evil, at the second almost wholly praiseworthy.

I believe it is the thorough realization of this truth by Pereda, and his unique knack of embodying it in his stories, that constitute the potent and subtle charm for which it has puzzled many readers to account.

From this view of life Pereda's entire production gets its complexion. His humor, which probably more than one of his admirers would at once single out as his most remarkable quality, is remarkable above all on account of its sobriety and restraint. Undeniably in some of his earliest novels, as "Worthy Men" (*Los Hombres de Pró*) and "Don Gonzalo González de la Gonzalera," the political satire becomes in spots so ferocious as to glide into burlesque. but these books hold no very high rank in Pereda's production, although "Don Gonzalo" contains a number of striking Spanish types. It is in several of the shorter sketches, in novels like "The Soup Pot" (*La Puchera*), and, above all, "Sotileza," that Pereda's genius has in every respect touched its high-water mark. But the peculiar nature of Pereda's genius makes it impossible to quote samples. Everybody may perceive at a glance the ludicrousness of "Sairey Gamp's" behavior at her patient's bedside. But the inexhaustible fun of a character like "Macabeo" in "A Chip of the Old Block" crops out only gradually and through the light reflected upon it from other characters, never crystalizing into grotesque attitudes that might be appreciated if torn from their setting.

Pereda's productions derive particular interest from the circumstance that here we are evidently in the presence of that rare bird, a self-taught writer. In a period in which nine-tenths of the most popular novelists wear the cast-off clothes of either Zola or the elder Dumas or William Dean Howells, it is refreshing to come across a man dressed in homespun. Pereda has now and then been likened to Zola, but, in the first place, the resemblance is but scant, and moreover those sketches of Pereda's that were published long before anybody knew of Zola's existence reveal unmistakably the author's naturalistic bent. Moreover, naturalistic tendencies were far from unknown in older Spanish

literature. "Don Quixote" and "Lazarillo of Tormes" would form all the background needed for Pereda. He himself owns indebtedness to Caballero and Trueba, and it is natural that these writers should have suggested to him the use of modern national subjects. But both of them, the man even more than the woman, remained ever far from the fearless simplicity of Pereda. And from abroad but a few, if any, suggestions appear to have reached him. Even Balzac might never have written a line, as far as this Spaniard is concerned.

He possesses not only the virtues of a self-made man, but also a share of his stubbornness and self-assertiveness. He knows not always where to stop; his instinct of selection, at times so wonderfully keen, appears here and there to be dormant, and then every detail that has caught his eye must needs be transcribed in full, regardless of its greater or lesser import. His descriptive passages, unsurpassed for convincing straightforwardness when at their best, are apt to run into mere enumeration of facts. His dialogue, which often renders so admirably the rhythm and flow of everyday conversation, with the underlying emotions discreetly but unmistakably suggested, time after time loses itself in a soulless chatter, as a once limpid stream may become lost in sand and mire. His style, bare and clean as a warrior's tent, does not always escape dreariness.

There is, furthermore, in his literary make-up a trait of clannishness: not a few of his sketches, and even some of the novels, seem written for an exclusive circle of north of Spain people, studded as they are with hints and references intelligible only to readers born and reared on the spot. On the other hand, one of the few tales of his which treat of city life ("Pedro Sánchez") has a long section of inestimable value to students of Spanish literature, but of no interest to anybody else.

Such pen pictures as "The Good Glory" and "The Levy" (in "Mountain Scenes") make one understand why enthusiastic countrymen have compared him with Velásquez. But the former—the tale of a funeral, with perfunctory

piety, spontaneous brandy, and all-round fighting galore—consists of two sections wholly flawless, and a third made up of quotations from some old play on the same subject, quite stale and witless. “The Levy” is excellent up to the last two or three pages, where the author begins to quote from a poem of a friend of his, who, he informs us, is “the inspired singer of our national glories.”

The frequent apostrophizing of the “patient reader” is another of Pereda’s slightly provoking habits. I also wish he had not assured us, in a note to “The End of a Race,” of the “strictly historical” character of that capital discussion between two shipwrecked sailors as to whether the Blessed Virgin would be likely to resent it if one of them were to drop his trousers. To be sure, they prevent him from saving himself by swimming, but at the same time they contain in one of their pockets the Virgin’s scapular. A story like this needs no crutches.

Generally speaking, Pereda’s novels suffer from looseness of grasp, and Spanish criticism has not allowed this failing to go unnoticed. But I am not aware that its true cause has as yet been laid bare.

Without a doubt Pereda might have constructed stories along the conventional lines, with fortunes lost and recovered, hidden crimes in the end befittingly punished, and the like—constructed them as deftly as most other people in the business; but from his very first start in literature he set himself a very different aim. The traditional “good plot” probably appeared to him a thing of a kind with the absolutely straight line or the perfect circle—interesting in its way, but with no counterpart in nature. He must have dreamed of transcribing with pen and ink part of the undulating course, the teeming multiplicity of human existence, reproducing on paper some section at least of this life of ours that revolves to-day round one center, to-morrow round a very different one, and may get from one point to another in a hundred ways, but never by the shortest. He tried over and over again, never failing ignominiously, and never conquering gloriously, until in “Sotileza” he brought forth

a work that, although not absolutely without blemish, was superior to all his previous ones, and which none of the later ones has ever eclipsed.

The word *sotileza* (literally subtility) is used by the Spanish fishermen to denote that thin part of the fishing tackle to which the hook is attached, and may be rendered by *fine-spun*. In the story it becomes a sort of pet name for an orphan girl whose pretty face and comparative daintiness set her aside from the rest of the people among whom she is living. She really was not beautiful, the author admits; but she was pretty, and she kept herself clean from sheer instinct, as the cats do. And neither fishermen nor their women folks are in the habit of keeping themselves clean.

Such is the keynote struck right at the opening, and adhered to throughout: a pretty girl, with an innate pride and self-respect, reacting more or less perceptibly on her immediate surroundings. No wonders are told of her. She is made neither particularly bright nor surprisingly high-spirited. And she romps it with the urchins on the beach, and the urchins like her, even love her, and some of them keep loving her after they have grown into young manhood. One of these, Andrés, by birth belongs to a social sphere far above that of Sotileza and the rest of her playmates, his father being a captain. It is easy to see why Andrés should be particularly attracted toward Sotileza, and for a while even imagine himself desperately in love with her.

However, when at last thoughtless gossip and deliberate malice seem to have forced things to the verge of a catastrophe that must either throw the two into each other's arms forever—as in Echegaray's "Galeotto"—or mercilessly crush them, . . . nothing very dramatic takes place. The expected scandal—the two are found locked up in a room—is averted mainly by the determined action of Sotileza, who singles out the woman at the head of the conspiracy—the one that turned the key and threw it away—walks close up to her, seizes her head between her two hands, administers her a good scolding in the presence of the crowd of eager neighbors, spits in her face, and

goes off, leaving the wretched creature with the sentiment of the bystanders turned against her. As a matter of fact, Sotileza has never felt either heart or senses stirred by Andrés's burning words; she has liked his company, that is all. She is a woman of neither high-aiming ambition nor strong passion—just a clean, honest, level-headed girl who now declares herself perfectly satisfied to marry a nice young fellow of her own class. And Andrés—well, he mopes awhile, and then allows himself to be united to the rich girl whom his parents long ago picked out for him.

However loath one may be to use strong language, candor demands the statement that wide roamings through European and American fiction will fail to bring the reader across another book which affects his mind precisely in the manner of "Sotileza." Others have written stories of wasted affection, flames of passion lighted in vain, tender yearnings made the plaything of sneering calculation. But the pathos is almost always heavy, the irony strained—nowhere is there anything quite equal to the sobriety and discretion of Pereda's touch.

Probably other readers besides me expected "Sotileza" to end tragically, and were at first disappointed at the placid conclusion. But I take it that on second thought everybody will feel that Pereda is right, and that the call for a tragical climax was not in anything that he had written, but merely an echo lingering in the reader's mind from a thousand machine-made novels and dramas. There are indeed conflicts properly to be solved only with the scythe of the Grim Reaper, and nothing but obloquy is due the author that from cowardice or sentimentality refrains from summoning such awe-inspiring assistance. But the problem in "Sotileza" demands no such severity. That Sotileza does not love Andrés is certain; it appears, in fact, questionable whether this hardy girl, who has spent most of her days in the open air of the beach with the boys, is at all capable of anything stronger than a feeling of good comradeship for whomsoever it might be. That ugly imp, Muergo, seems more than any one else to call forth her par-

ticular sympathy—a phenomenon due probably to a mixture of womanly kindness and a touch of coquetry. Other girls have been known to single out the apparently least attractive of their admirers for passing attention.

As for Andrés, amiable and upright boy though he be, there is not enough steel in his make-up for him to brave long and successfully the will of his parents, the prejudices of society. He has dwelt among the people of the beach as a bird of passage on a foreign shore, to return in due time to his native latitude. All of which is made clear, not by means of psychological analysis, but through a succession of lifelike pictures. Although the subject would easily lend itself to an ironical treatment, nothing of the kind is attempted. If, indeed, there be at all any smile hovering about Pereda's lips, it must be one of kindly toleration. But nobody knows: he keeps himself so well hidden. To be sure, it is not romantic, nor in the conventional sense grandiose or pathetic, what here passes before our eyes. But somehow it has the color of life and the ring of truth. It holds us while present, haunts us still when past. It is like the music of some foreign, far-away race: melody there seems to be little or none, the rhythm is almost bewildering in its oddness. But when it is all over, something in us craves its repetition.

And why not betray the secret? Pereda has practiced a very clever trick on his readers. Knowing that the deeper charm of the book would forever remain hidden from the multitude, he placed right at the entrance a figure that could not fail to lure all passers-by, be they ever so naïve or ever so fastidious—the friar Apolinar. He is the second immortal friar in Spanish literature, and I am not sure but that he is of still more imperishable stuff than Father Isla's celebrated Fray Gerundio. He is certainly very different and far more sympathetic. It is safe to say that whoever has been in the company of this man of God through two or three pages will miss not a single one of those that remain. Poor Apolinar's cleanliness is doubtful, his lack of higher education indisputable; his speech is un-

couth, his personal appearance hardly even decent. His only pair of trousers changes owners in the very first chapter, and there is more than a suspicion that through several succeeding scenes he wanders with nothing but underwear beneath his cowl. But now consider that the people he moves among know not what a bath is; that one of the boys whom he is to guide heavenward is uncertain whether it will be eight or nine "gods" he will have to face up there, the others appearing but slightly better enlightened; that, to touch once more on that delicate matter, he gives up his trousers to an urchin who has none at all because his mother's cow chewed his only pair to rags while they were being dried on a fence. Or consider nothing in particular, only listen to the man for five minutes, and you will be ready to jog after him through the dirty streets where his many and onerous duties take him, just to watch for those quaint and lovable sayings that with such brief intervals drop from his lips.

"Sotileza" presents other sturdy men and women besides Apolinar; but, were they ever so frail and feeble, this marvelous friar could gather the whole company into the folds of his cowl and carry them unhurt down through the ages. *He* is sure to remain above ground; centuries will never kill him.

With Pereda might fitly close a review of prose fiction as evolved from the formulas laid down by Goethe, Scott, and Balzac. At the time of Pereda's appearance in literature these formulas seemed worn out. The fault was with the novelists more than with the formulas, but it is evident that a new impetus, a bugle call, was needed to save fiction from stagnation. More than one impetus came, more than one bugle call was sounded. Vivifying currents issued almost simultaneously from France, Russia, and the northern countries, met and merged, for a while at least. When the movement reached Spain, the country's brightest minds recognized with just pride that what was most valuable in it had to no small extent been anticipated by one of their countrymen—him with whom Spanish fiction grew into manhood.

JOAKIM REINHARD.